A DARK DAY IN THE BOOK WORLD

KEVIN MIMS

MAY 17, 2021

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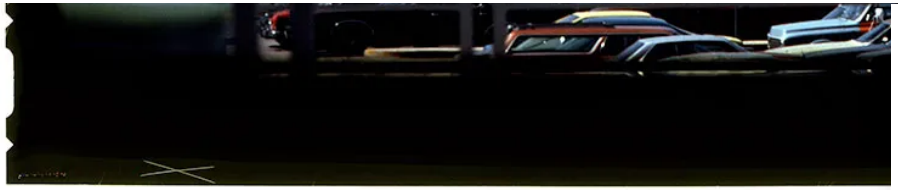

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World Book Day is celebrated internationally on April 23. In
is celebrated as Independent Bookstore Day. International C
worldwide every April 2nd, the anniversary of the birth of H
unofficially recognized as National Book Lovers Day in the

Many dates on the calendar are set aside to celebrate books
not aware of any date that is set aside specifically to celebra
sell books, but if there were such a date it should probably b
incredibly tragic.

On May 25, 1979, a DC-10 jetliner known as American Airlines flight 191 crashed just seconds after taking off from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. A total of 273 people were killed in the resulting explosion, including all 258 passengers, all 13 crewmembers, and two people on the ground who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It remains the deadliest aviation disaster on American soil. The crash killed people from many walks of life, but the industry hit hardest was the book business. That's because the flight, which was bound for Los Angeles, was carrying dozens of people who were planning to attend the American Booksellers Association's annual four-day trade show there. *Rolling Stone* magazine once called December 6, 1969, the date on which four people died tragically at an outdoor rock concert near Tracy, CA, "rock and roll's all-time worst day." May 25, 1979, was almost certainly American publishing's all-time worst day.

John Robison

Gail Dhariwal

Photos by Justin Kestenbaum

Margaret Stacks

5 friends, competitors crash victims

By JAMES A. HARRIS
Staff Writer

Up until 3:03 p.m. Friday, May 25, the five Lansing area residents aboard American Airlines Flight 191 were friends and competitors in a common vocation.

In the end, that vocation — and their love of books — brought them together to share the tragic fate of 266 other passengers aboard the doomed DC-10 which plummeted 2,000 feet to the ground only minutes after takeoff from Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

All five were bound for Los Angeles' Convention Center for the Saturday opening of the American Booksellers Association's annual four-day trade show and convention.

THREE OF the five were employees of Jocundry's Books in East Lansing.

The other two were employed by Suits News Company in Lansing.

All are now dead — the aftermath of the worst air disaster in U.S. aviation history.

They are: — John Robison, 40, 327 University Drive, East Lansing. Robison, owner of Jocundry's Books and former Michigan State University English instructor, opened the store two and a half years ago. He is survived by his wife, Madra, and his 8-year-old son, Benjamin.

— Gail Dhariwal, 28, 593 Virginia Avenue, East Lansing. Mrs. Dhariwal, married to Cyrus Miller, was an employee of Jocundry's Book Store. They had no children.

— Margaret (Peggy) Stacks, 26, 650 Wayland Avenue, East Lansing. She was a manager at Jocundry's Books. Ms. Stacks, only daughter of Frederick and Margaret Stacks of Okemos, is survived by her parents and brothers David, Frederick, and Donald.

— Douglas Ruble, 29, 307 West Madison Avenue, DeWitt Township. Ruble was chief book buyer for Suits News where he had worked since graduating from DeWitt High School in 1967. He was graduated from MSU in 1971. He is survived by his wife, Jenny, and four children, Doug, 9; Laura, 4; Barbara, 3; and Sally, 1.

— Marcia E. Platt, 26, of 1438 Haslett Road, East Lansing. She was assistant book buyer for Suits News Company where she had worked since 1970. She is a graduate of East Lansing High School and MSU where she studied English. Ms. Platt is survived by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Platt of Sacramento, Calif., and two sisters, Karen Platt of San Diego, Calif., and Marilyn Porter of Oskaloosa, Iowa.

BESIDES BEING common victims of a mind-boggling tragedy, many of the passengers aboard Flight 191 shared some kind of interest in the publication industry. Many were bound for the same convention as the five from the Lansing area.

Concluded on page A-7

Marcia E. Platt

Douglas Ruble

In 2019, on the fortieth anniversary of the disaster, *The Chicago Tribune* published brief biographies of many of the victims. One of them was 40-year-old John Robison (above with his traveling companions), owner of Jocundry's Books, a treasured bookstore, now long defunct, in East Lansing, Michigan.

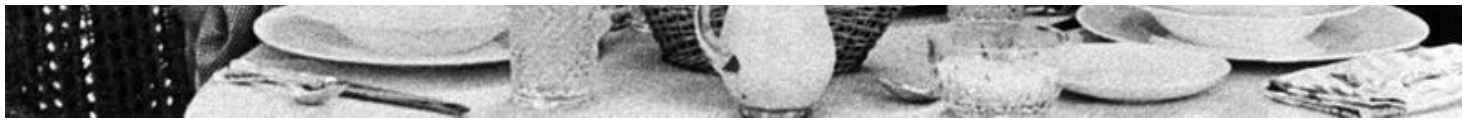
Traveling with Robison that day were two of his employees, 26-year-old Margaret “Peggy” Stacks (above) and 28 year-old Gail Susan Dhariwal. Two friends of the Jocundry’s contingent also died on the plane, 26-year-old Marcia Platt and 29-year-old Douglas Ruble. They worked as book buyers for East Lansing’s Suits News Company. Ruble was survived by his wife as well as by his four children, all of them under the age of ten.

The people bound for the ABA convention included writers, editors, publishers, editorial assistants, book buyers, bookstore owners, and book clerks. The stories provided by the *Tribune* portray a group of people who were passionate about books. Take, for instance, 55-year-old Elaine Howell (pictured above), of Hurricane, West Virginia, who managed a bookstore in nearby Charleston. The *Tribune* quotes her daughter, Nancy Howell, paying this tribute to her mother: "The ABA convention was always one of my mother's favorite activities, as she met authors, learned about new books, and spent time with colleagues from across the country. She had helped establish the local city library when I was a child. She loved books and the bookstore business. Her small bookstore in Charleston brought in an amazing array of authors – including Julia Child, Pearl Buck, and other well-known authors of the time. One of her specialty areas was keeping a diverse inventory of books by Appalachian authors, including her good friend Jesse Stuart."

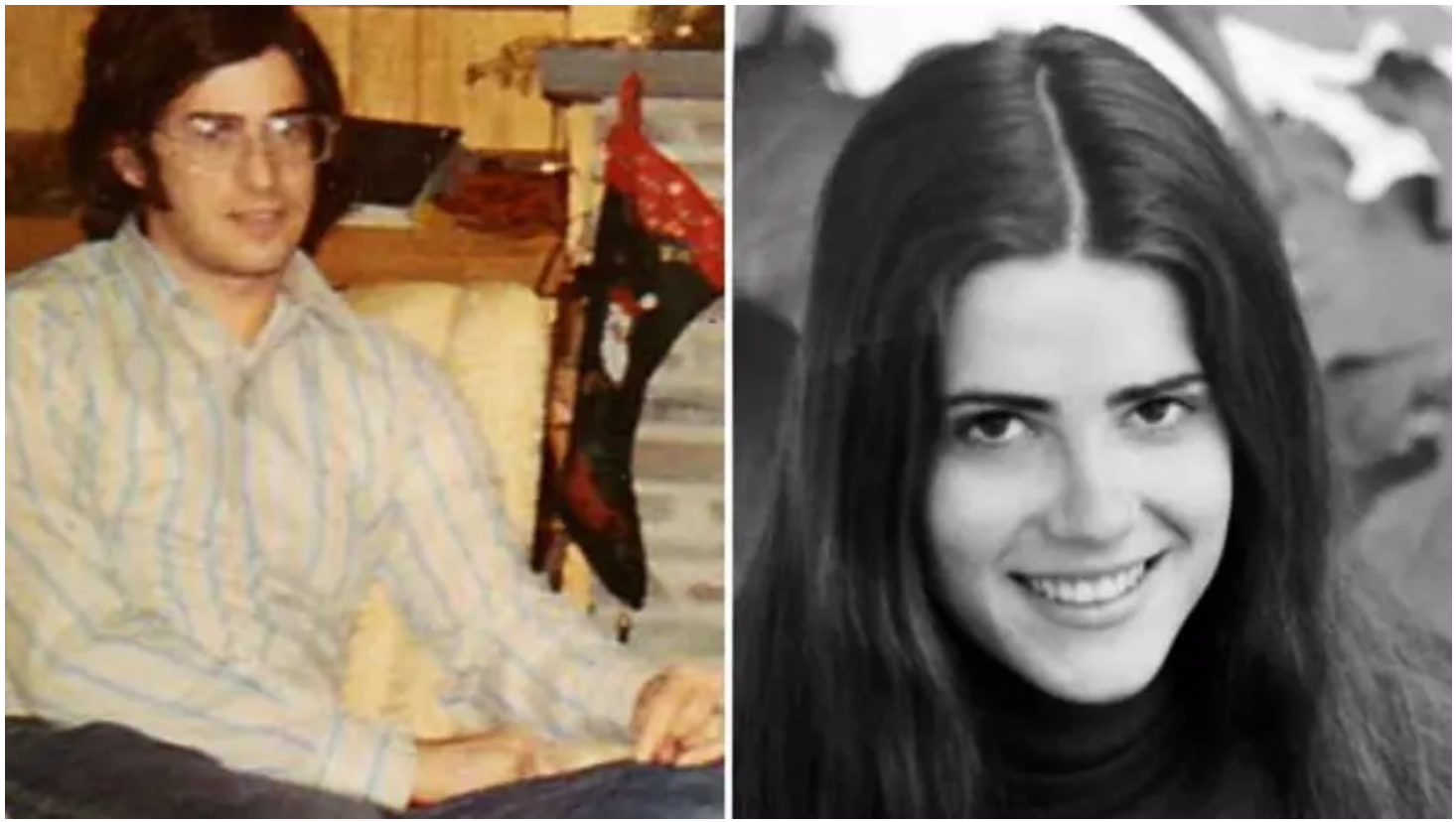
Frances R. Gemme (above) was a vice president at Children's Press in Chicago. He left behind a wife and three children.

Alan and Judi Green (above), the parents of three boys, were planning to open a bookstore and were flying to the booksellers convention to make some connections. Fortunately, the boys stayed behind.

Vicky Chen Haider (above) was a 34-year-old fiction editor for Playboy as well as a freelance writer.

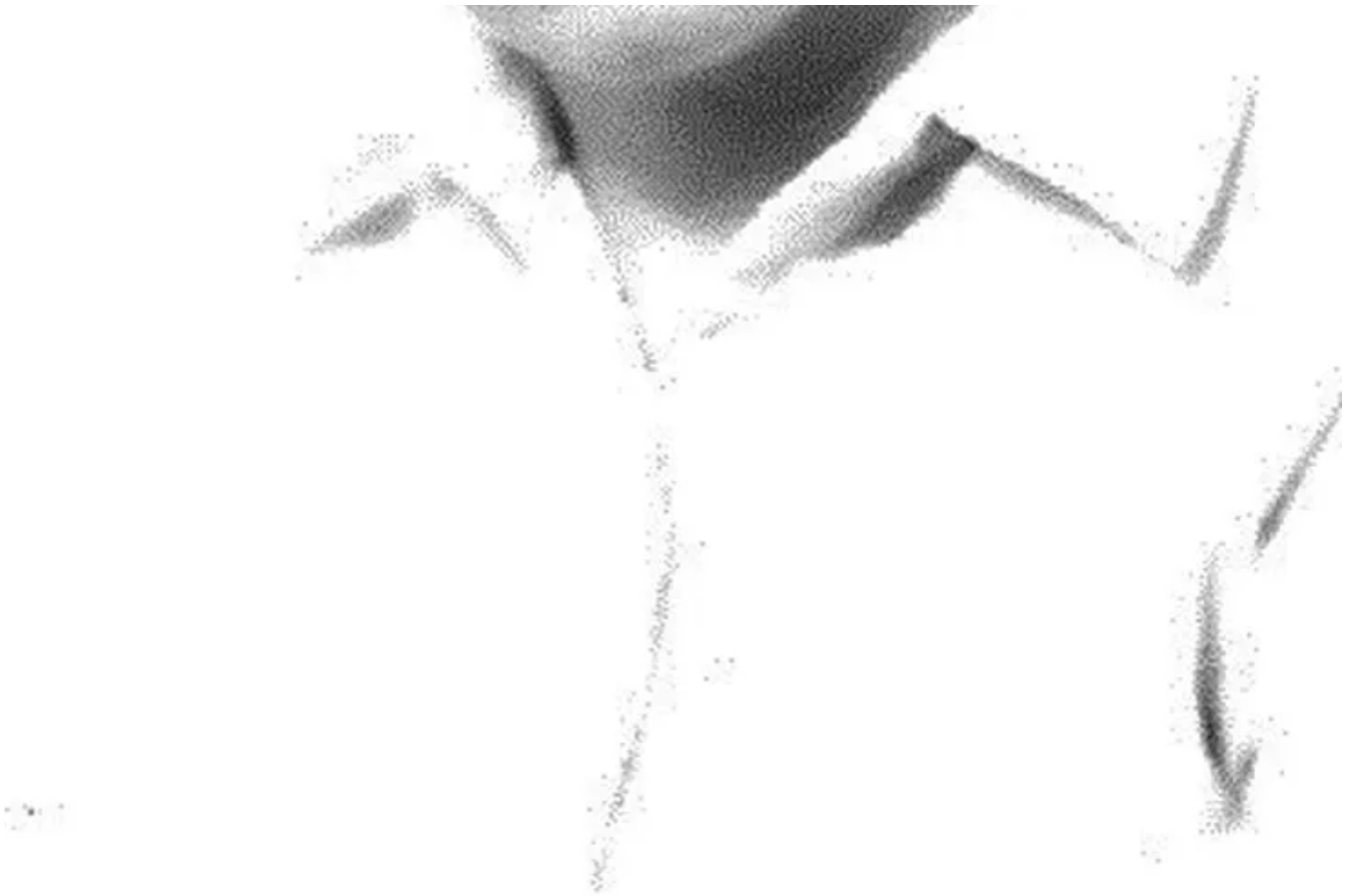


Stephen and Susan Lang (above), a couple so perfect they even dabbled in doing promotional photos with their children, were on their way to L.A. as representatives of Barrington's Countryside Books. The children stayed behind.



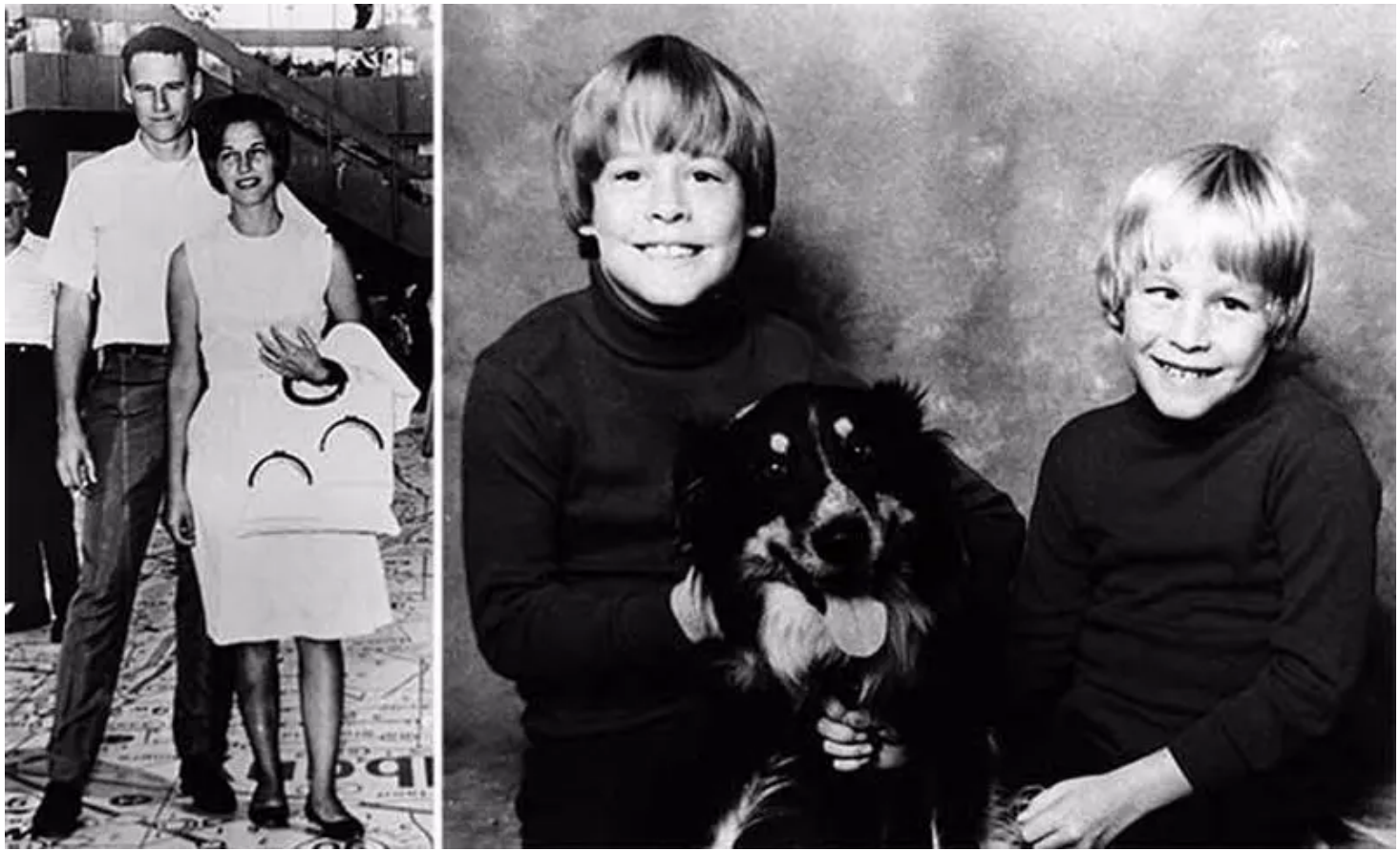
Ina Shatkin (right) and her husband Loyd were traveling to the booksellers convention. She was

26 and the operator of Open Door Bookstore in Schenectady, New York.

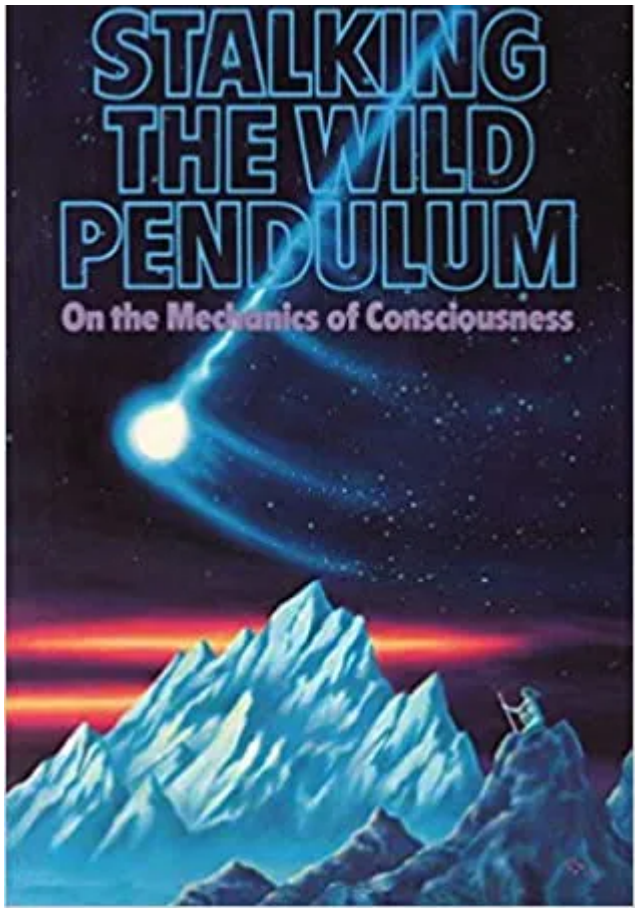


Another victim who was passionate about books was Mary Tierney Sheridan (above), who came to the U.S. from Ireland when she was 15 and had very little formal education. According to her husband, Tom, Sheridan was an autodidact who "had a great appreciation for literature and was an excellent writer and editor. She obtained a job at the New York *Times* and then worked in various book publishing companies." The couple moved to Chicago in 1974 when Mary got a job with *Playboy* magazine (a number of *Playboy*'s editorial staff were killed in the crash). Mary traveled the world to help set up international editions of the magazine. She was on her way to

the ABA convention to network with foreign publishers. She was 37 when she died.



Stephen Sutton (above with his wife), a 38-year-old senior editor of adult non-fiction at Rand McNally, brought his wife, Carolyn, also 38, and two sons on the trip. The boys, Colin and Christopher, were 9 and 7, respectively.



Itzhak Bentov, a 55-year-old native of Czechoslovakia, was the author of *Stalking the Wild Pendulum*, a book described by the *New Yorker* as "a brilliantly executed theoretical romp through the universe..." The book remains in print to this day and has a very high rating at Amazon.com, where 290 people have reviewed it, almost all of them favorably.

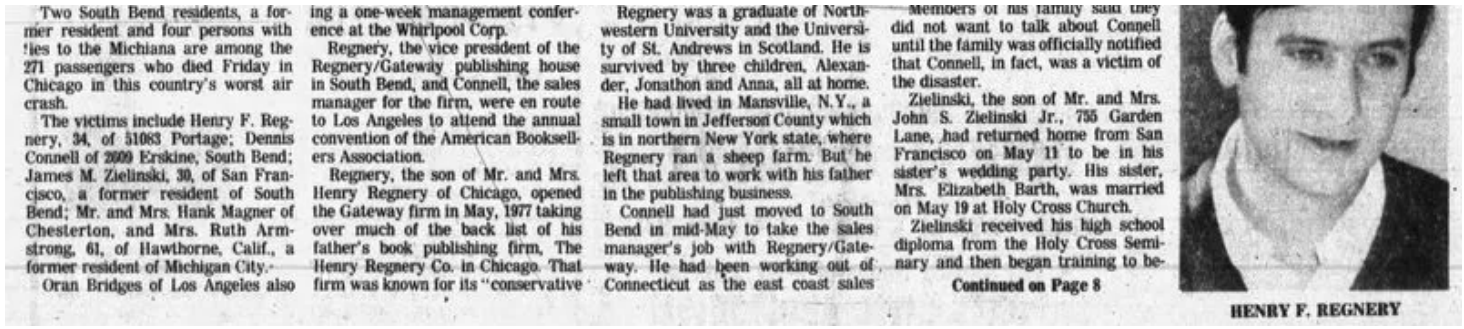
Several with ties to Michiana aboard airliner

By GERALD LUTKUS
Tribune Staff Writer

died in the crash. Bridges had been in St. Joseph, Mich., this week attend-

voice." It first published William F. Buckley's "God and Man at Yale."

representative for the publishing firm.



Two South Bend residents, a former resident and four persons with ties to the Michiana are among the 271 passengers who died Friday in Chicago in this country's worst air crash.

The victims include Henry F. Regnery, 34, of 51083 Portage; Dennis Connell of 2609 Erskine, South Bend; James M. Zielinski, 30, of San Francisco, a former resident of South Bend; Mr. and Mrs. Hank Magner of Chesterton, and Mrs. Ruth Armstrong, 61, of Hawthorne, Calif., a former resident of Michigan City.

Oran Bridges of Los Angeles also ing a one-week management conference at the Whirlpool Corp.

Regnery, the vice president of the Regnery/Gateway publishing house in South Bend, and Connell, the sales manager for the firm, were en route to Los Angeles to attend the annual convention of the American Booksellers Association.

Regnery, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Regnery of Chicago, opened the Gateway firm in May, 1977 taking over much of the back list of his father's book publishing firm, The Henry Regnery Co. in Chicago. That firm was known for its "conservative

Regnery was a graduate of Northwestern University and the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He is survived by three children, Alexander, Jonathon and Anna, all at home.

He had lived in Mansville, N.Y., a small town in Jefferson County which is in northern New York state, where Regnery ran a sheep farm. But he left that area to work with his father in the publishing business.

Connell had just moved to South Bend in mid-May to take the sales manager's job with Regnery/Gateway. He had been working out of Connecticut as the east coast sales

Members of his family said they did not want to talk about Connell until the family was officially notified that Connell, in fact, was a victim of the disaster.

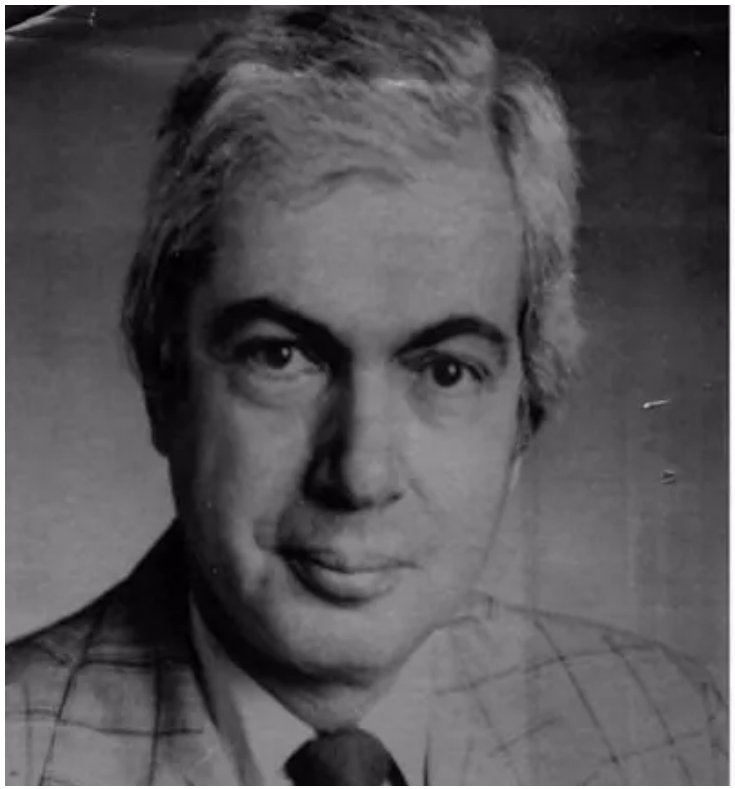
Zielinski, the son of Mr. and Mrs. John S. Zielinski Jr., 755 Garden Lane, had returned home from San Francisco on May 11 to be in his sister's wedding party. His sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Barth, was married on May 19 at Holy Cross Church.

Zielinski received his high school diploma from the Holy Cross Seminary and then began training to be-

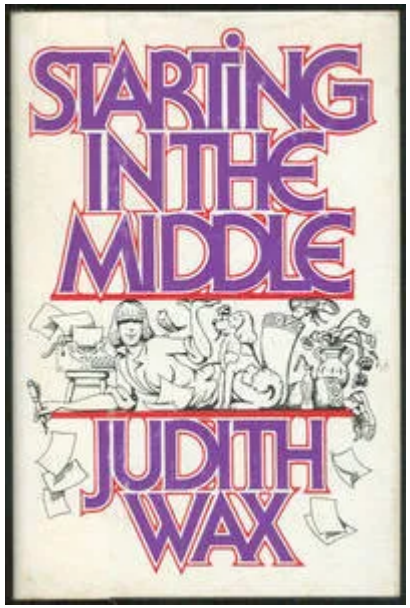
Continued on Page 8

HENRY F. REGNERY

Henry F. Regnery, Jr., was a vice president of his family's publishing company, Regnery-Gateway Publishing Company, which specialized in politically conservative non-fiction. He died at 35, leaving behind three young children.



Also on board the flight was 51-year-old Sheldon Wax (above right), *Playboy*'s managing editor. He'd been with the company since 1960. Accompanying him was his 47-year-old wife, Judith (right). Hers was a particularly tragic death. A longtime aspiring writer, Judith had put off pursuing a writing career in order to raise the couple's two children. As the children approached college age, she finally began writing personal essays, and publishing them in a variety of prestigious places, including *The New York Times Magazine*. Eventually she put together an entire collection of essays about the difficulties of raising a family and managing a mid-life career change.



The book, appropriately enough, was called *Starting in the Middle*. She died shortly before the book was published. Hauntingly, in one of the essays in her book, Wax noted that she tried to

pursue a career outside the home when her children were still just eleven and nine years old, but guilt about leaving them for long business trips caused her to develop a number of psychological problems, including a fear of flying. “When the job required travel, I developed such a fear of airplanes my head trembled from takeoff to landing,” she wrote. After quitting the job and returning to full-time mothering, she lost her fear of flying. Curiously, the paperback edition of the book contains a blurb from Erica Jong – “Wise and unfailingly funny.” – who was best known at the time for her debut novel, *Fear of Flying*.

The above are just a few of the many bookish people who died on the darkest day in the history of American publishing. The events of rock and roll’s all-time worst day have been commemorated in the film *Gimme Shelter* and are (cryptically) mentioned in Don McLean’s classic song *American Pie*. They have also been written about in countless histories of rock and roll. To my knowledge, American publishing’s darkest day has never been commemorated in film, song, or a book on the history of the industry. But I believe it ought to be. There may not be an official day to do the appropriate remembering, but I recommend that booklovers everywhere set aside a few moments every May 25th to think about those who have devoted their lives to keeping America’s bookshelves fully stocked and endlessly fascinating. The plane crash took away the lives of the literary toilers aboard flight 191, but it can never take away their legacy.

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